Q: Does self-defense prevent violence?

A: This is really two questions:

- First, *can women’s resistance stop sexual assault?* The answer is a resounding yes. There is a large and nearly unanimous body of research that demonstrates that women frequently resist violence, and that their resistance is often successful. This research, of course, includes many women without self-defense training.

- Second, *does self-defense training decrease women’s risk of assault?* Here the research literature is smaller, but unanimous: Yes. Three major studies over the past few years, including a large, randomized control trial, found that women who complete an ESD class are at least 50-60% less likely to be raped over the following year than similar women who did not learn self-defense (see Hollander 2014, Senn et al. 2015, Sarnquist et al. 2014, and Sinclair et al. 2013). In addition, women who completed a self-defense class were one-third as likely to report an attempted rape. In other words, women who learn self-defense are both more likely to avoid rape if they are attacked, and much less likely to be attacked in the first place.

**Does self-defense increase a woman’s risk of injury?**

- No. There is an association between resistance and injury, in that women who resist a sexual assault are also more likely to be injured. But research that looks at the sequence of events has found that in general, the injury precedes the resistance. In short, women resist because they are being injured, rather than being injured because they resist. On average, resistance does not increase the risk of injury.

**Shouldn’t we be putting all our resources into prevention strategies focused on perpetrators?**

- No. Violence against women is a complex social problem. Ultimately, large-scale social changes will be needed before violence against women can be stopped. However, this kind of social change is slow – and so far, our efforts have not been very successful. If we focus only on perpetrator-focused, “primary” prevention strategies, we are condemning millions of women to suffering rape and sexual assault. While we wait for these efforts to work, ESD training can provide an immediate, and effective, antidote for sexual violence.

- There has been little research on the effectiveness of prevention strategies focused on potential perpetrators. Most strategies that have been rigorously evaluated have been found to be ineffective at preventing violence.

- Preventing sexual violence will require a comprehensive range of efforts. Some efforts should be long-term (e.g., cultural climate assessment and change), others should be medium-term (e.g., bystander intervention training), and some
should be short-term (e.g., self-defense training). We do not have to choose only one approach; a complex social problem requires that we address it on multiple fronts and in multiple ways.

Is self-defense training cost-effective?

- Yes. Sexual assault is very expensive, in terms of post-assault medical service, legal services, and human suffering. Self-defense training, in contrast, is quite inexpensive. A recent Nairobi-based study found that comprehensive self-defense training cost US$1.75 for every assault prevented, compared with an average of US$86 for post-assault hospital services. Given the higher cost of medical services, it is likely that the savings would be even greater in the United States.

Is self-defense victim blaming?

- No. Empowerment-based self-defense classes explicitly attribute responsibility for assault to perpetrators, not victims. Just because a woman is capable of defending herself does not mean that she is responsible for doing so.
- Although self-defense training is frequently lumped in with other kinds of risk reduction advice (e.g., staying out of public spaces, traveling with a buddy, wearing modest clothing, or avoiding alcohol), it differs in important ways. Staying home, relying on others for protection, and limiting one’s clothing or alcohol consumption all constrain women’s lives. Self-defense training, in contrast, expands women’s range of action, empowering them to make their own choices about where they go and what they do.
- Some people have worried that women who learn self-defense may blame themselves if they are later unable to prevent an attack. However, research has found that women with self-defense training who experience a subsequent assault blame themselves no more – or even less – than women without self-defense training. Moreover, women who are raped but physically resist are actually less likely than other women to blame themselves for their assault.

What else should I know about self-defense training?

- Learning self-defense empowers women in ways that go far beyond preventing assault. Empowerment self-defense training decreases women’s fear and anxiety and increases their confidence, their sense of self-efficacy, and their self-esteem. Learning self-defense helps women feel stronger and more confident in their bodies. Women report more comfortable interactions with strangers, acquaintances, and intimates, both in situations that seem dangerous and those that do not. Empowerment self-defense training can also be healing to survivors of sexual violence.

References and Further Resources on Women’s Resistance and Self-Defense

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Aren’t prevention strategies focused on perpetrators a better idea?


Is self-defense training cost-effective?

Is self-defense victim blaming?


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